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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the preschool component of the Educational Agreement presented to the Portugal Parliament in May 1996 to improve the quality of the educational system. Among the 10 Action Commitments in the Agreement is the creation of a national network for preschool education. The context of the inclusion of preschool in this Agreement is discussed, including the results of research documenting the need for preschool education in Portugal, such as low literacy rates and high secondary drop-out rates. Discussion of the current plan for expanding preschool education includes: (1) the changing role of governmental ministries in preschool education to consist of regulation, supervision, coordination, and compensation; (2) the need to respond to cultural diversity in preschool programs; and (3) new legislation, such as the Public Law on Preschool Education, which affirms the principle of social partnership for the expansion of the preschool program and delineates priorities for support and finding for preschool education. The development of curriculum guidelines and contract-programs with the state are part of its regulatory role to enhance educational quality in preschools. A new inter-ministerial Office for the Expansion and Development of Preschool Education will coordinate the initiatives for the development of preschool education. There is increased recognition of the need for training for early childhood educators at the university level, for providing inservice training for all current preschool teachers, and for preparing preschool teachers in adult education. The early childhood educator should be a professional with a sense of her vocation. (Contains 16 references.) (KDFB)

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Planting the field of Portuguese Preschool Education: new policies for old roots

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It takes a whole village
To educate a child
(African proverb)

An Educational Agreement for the Future

Education became a priority for the Government elected on October 6, 1995, in Portugal. An Educational Agreement was presented to the Parliament in May 1996, with an invitation to all partners - public, private, etc. - to join efforts for the improvement of the quality of the Portuguese educational system. The point of departure of the Educational Agreement is that education is everybody´s responsibility; the school is seen as the nucleus of the educational process, a link within a system of local education communities; the relationship between state, education and society has to be redefined so as to bring about a broader participation of all forces and social partners in the decision-making process and in the implementation of educational policies.

Among other strategic goals, the Government wants: to guarantee high quality basic education for all with priority for preschool education and priority for the nine years of compulsory

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education and, more specifically, to elementary education; to value teachers, respecting them and recognizing their essential role in the improvement of the educational process.

Among the 10 Action Commitments included in the Agreement the Government wants to de-centralize educational policies and to create a national network for preschool education involving several Ministries and social partners.

I will be developing the recent early childhood education policies from these standpoints.

Understanding the Context

The Educational Agreement was enacted after a period of considerable frustration and discouragement concerning the development of preschool education in Portugal. Despite the boom of public preschool education after the 1974 revolution, until 1980, previous governments had not recognized the crucial importance of preschool education. The educational reform of the nineteen-eighties totally neglected the preschool period. Later policies gave the responsibility for the development of preschool education to the private sector without a regulating role for the state. The rates of development of preschool education were very low, the public network was not developing, professionals were undervalued, teacher unions were on the streets claiming a more clear investment of the state in early childhood education.

Research units in some universities, with specific attention to the work developed by Joaquim Bairrão at the Porto University (Bairrão and Tietze, 1995), presented the Portuguese authorities with

a clear diagnosis of the situation: 29.4% of the children (ages 3 to 6) stayed at home with their mothers, 37% were cared for by other family members. The institutional coverage rate was around 45%. In his study Bairrão pointed out the need to increase access to preschool education to all children, developing programs for ethnic minorities, children at risk and children with special needs.

In 1994, João Formosinho was invited by the National Advisory Board for Education to write a "Parecer" (a sort of White Paper or Report) about the situation of preschool education in Portugal. This "Parecer" was approved unanimously by the Advisory Board and was very well accepted by the public. It recommended that the state and local administrative authorities play a much decisive role in the process of development of the preschool system and that the state should be financially involved in preschool education. This set of events brought preschool education into the public arena and into the political agenda. It became a leit-motif for the subsequent elections. The analysis made by the "Parecer" (White Paper) of João Formosinho highlighted the fragmentation of services in several ministries and the lack of coordination among them; the separation from elementary education; the primacy of caretaking functions rather than educational ones; the differences in salaries and working conditions among early childhood professionals, depending on whether they worked in childcare or educational settings.

Another study, presented to the National Advisory Board of Education in October 1995, also highlighted the need for investment in preschool education. It was a study under the responsibility of the

present Secretary of State of Education (Benavente,Rosa, Costa & Avila, 1995, October) which evaluated the literacy rates of the Portuguese. It showed some of the educational and cultural deprivation of our people: 70% seldom read a book; 40% seldom read a newspaper. In a scale of 5 levels of literacy (with 5 being high), 42.4% of the population was between levels 0 or 1. Motivating children from an early age to wanting to read or write becomes an obvious necessity. Setting up clear goals for elementary education in terms of basic competencies the children need to acquire at the end of it, is another urgent matter.

Another concern are the high percentage of school failure which creates a school drop-out rate of 35% before the end of the 9 years of compulsory schooling. These very disturbing data lead us to recognize the need for preschool education. Research all over the world has been telling us that investing in good quality preschool education may prevent school failure and reduce the school drop out rate. Thus the urgent need to develop and enhance preschool education became obvious for Portugal.

Following the election of October 1995, the newly appointed Minister of Education, Professor Marçal Grilo, asked Professor João Formosinho and me to prepare a Strategic Report about the development and expansion of preschool education. This report was presented to the Minister in February 1996. On the basis of this report a document was presented to the public last March outlining the plans for the expansion and development of preschool education in Portugal.

The Expansion of the Preschool System

Plans for the expansion and development

The underlying principles for the Expansion Project envision preschool education in Portugal as the first stage of basic education, as a foundational structure and a scaffold for life-long learning. Preschool education is also seen in close connection with elementary education and also with special education: the educational problems of the country cannot be solved unless the quality of education is high at both the preschool and elementary level, and also provides education for special needs and adult education.

For the authors of the strategic report good quality preschool education requires also investment in adult education: if good quality preschool education contributes to the overall development of children, especially of those in most need, it can also become a provocation for the adult development (parents, teachers, community agents, authorities, etc.) if they become involved in the planning, creation and development of effective preschool programs, if they become co-constructors of quality programs. Yet this means that teachers themselves need to become highly skilled in involving adults as partners. Finally, the authors understand preschool education to be an imperative and a cultural necessity, not just a social necessity. By cultural necessity it is understood the capacity for life-long learning, for aesthetical appreciation, for intellectual curiosity. They envision preschool education as a first step on the path toward a more humane society.

The lines of action for the development and expansion of preschool education in Portugal point out to the need to establish the principle of a

single unified pedagogical supervision of pre-school education under the Ministry of Education, with the reinforcement of inspection and assessment.

This pedagogical tutelage means defining: rules and framing for the preschool programs; different kinds of offer; organizational models and curriculum guidelines; modes of financing; rules for staff who works in preschools; training teachers and other staff and providing consistent in-service training; supporting and developing pedagogical facilitation; defining rules for the evaluation of the quality of services; supervising and inspecting.

The current plan is:

1 - To launch the **Program for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education** in coordination with local authorities, the Government assuming a guidance and regulatory role, for which purpose the budget was doubled.

2 - To establish program-contracts with public municipalities and private entities aiming at the expansion and the development of preschool education;

3 - To adopt an organizational model within the public network to expand preschool education in connection with elementary education;

4 - To settle, through agreed upon initiatives, a real partnership between the state and civil society;

5 - To make preschool education a developmental unit of the educational society, involving children,parents, professionals and society in general.

The role of the Government

A new role is foreseen for the Government: a better state, providing less direct services, having a less bureaucratic administration, but providing a more efficient supervision, with a regulating and compensatory role, with a better coordination of the general availability of preschools (Formosinho, 1994) and assuming preschool education as the first stage of basic education but also as a service to families. The regulating role means creating legislation, providing technical and pedagogical support, creating a system of inspection; better supervision means to put in place assessment and evaluation through a systematic inspection system; the coordination provision means the constant monitoring of the system so as to render possible the compensatory role of the state and the development of the public network as standard; the compensatory role means that the state should give a special and more direct attention to isolated and socially deprived areas.

In assuming this variety of roles, the State has to: mobilize initiatives so as to guarantee full access to preschool education to all children; assume a dynamic equilibrium between the central role of planner, arbiter, with regulation and identification/correction of internal asymmetries of the system, and, on the other side, the development of diversified projects in each region and educational community.

This strategic role of the state implies: considering preschool education centers as centers with both an educational and a social role; maintaining the standard role of the public network of kindergartens and improving this network around large cities and

culturally and educationally needed or disadvantaged regions; promoting the creation of other preschool programs by non-public initiatives; providing larger visibility of the state by creating an integrated system of support and technical control, evaluation, supervision, training and facilitation and inspection; guaranteeing flexibility of the different modalities according to the social needs of the region where the preschool unit is offered; enacting a less bureaucratic administration and better planning of the national network; providing a compensatory role of social and regional inequalities.

The Expansion Plan proposes to extended the preschool coverage up to 90% of the 5 years olds, 75% of the four years olds and 60% of the three years olds by the year of 1999.

As the **Plan for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education** concludes, the Government purposes "a project that can become a true mobilizing contract. Through the harmonization of initiatives, efforts, energies, good will, through a healthy sense of citizenship and social participation, this project is possible. The role of the state is to regulate, to coordinate and to guarantee for carrying out of equitable ends which can correct social inequalities. The role of the civil society is to initiate, to propose, to innovate and to articulate efforts through creative and participatory dynamics" (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Involving all partners

The Educational Agreement pointed out to a broader participation of all forces and social partners in the educational policies. The new role of

the state in education that we just described earlier highlights this broad participation. The **Plan for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education** invites several ministries to articulate their efforts: the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security; the Ministry of Planning and Administration; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Culture.

The most important partner for the expansion of the public preschool system is the Association of Portuguese Municipalities. Negotiations with this Association are underway. They will play a crucial role in the development of this plan. Other important partners are the Association of Private non-profit Organizations and the Association of Private and Cooperative Schools. They can also become partners of the Government in this expansion process. The Government is opened to establish **contract-programs** with private non-profit institutions and with private cooperative ones. Besides steady work with these partners, the Ministry of Education needs to negotiate its policies (and this Expansion Plan) with other social partners which play crucial roles in Portuguese society: Teacher Unions and Teacher Associations; Parent Associations; Foundations and other Non-profit Organizations, etc.

Responding to contextual diversity

The national network of kindergartens is composed of state institutions, municipal institutions, private non-profit and private profit ones. All these settings are part of the national network of kindergartens. Therefore the concept of public interest includes both state and private institutions. The Government makes the coordination of the provisions so as to fund the institutions that are of public interest. The state also

recognizes the need to respond to contextual diversity. Sparsely populated areas may have programs called "itinerant", with a traveling teacher visiting children and parents in their home and providing home-based programs; they may provide educational activities just a few days a week. Deprived urban areas may create special "children and community activity centers", involving all community agencies and using an ecological approach.

The opening hours of the public kindergartens are under evaluation to ensure that they respond to the needs of working families. The consulting board of the kindergartens where the local administrative authorities are represented was invited to develop projects for after school activities and adequate meals with the help of local non-profit organizations.

New Legislation and Measures

Public laws

The Public Law on Preschool Education recently approved by the Portuguese Parliament recognizes the new role of the state from the way it was previously defined and affirms the principle of social partnership for the expansion of the preschool system. In this law, the role of preschool education is seen as contributing to the whole development of the child and as a support for the families. Preschool education aims at providing the child with a rich group experience, with intellectually stimulating experiences within a safe, predictable and structured environment. The child will learn the social knowledge skills needed to interact with the others, especially those who are "different" or marked by social exclusion. Among other goals preschool education attempts also to

develop in the child a positive sense of himself with curiosity for the surrounding world in the recognition for different forms of life and culture, creating a sense that school is a place for multiple learning opportunities. It aims to develop critical thinking and active learning by proactive problem solving, bringing the child to cultural and aesthetical appreciation. Preschool education aims at providing children with motivation to use multiple languages and among them reading and writing. It aims also at giving an education for health and for protecting the environment, giving first-hand experiences with the physical world. It aims at educating children for citizenship and "democratic" participation at their age level. The law recognizes the possibility for different modalities of preschool education as a response to contextual diversity.

The priorities for support and funding are, according to the law: regions deprived of preschool education; regions where there is risk of social exclusion and school exclusion; regions affected by high rates of school failure; urban centers and industrialized zones with dense populations;

New legislation of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Work opens the possibility, through a joint agreement of these two ministries, to use unemployed youth and adults for the development of sociocultural activities for children, specifically during after school hours, responding to projects and programs created by schools

Curriculum guidelines

Curriculum Guidelines are seen as an important part of the regulatory role of the state in order to provide educational quality to all preschool programs. Those curriculum guidelines should be the expression

of professional knowledge about the field and a statement of what should children learn in preschool. Their application is also a condition for funding of the schools that want to establish a **contract-program** with the State. These curriculum guidelines will help preschool educators to make a more reflected and purposeful practice.

The curriculum guidelines aim at giving visibility to preschool education; facilitating the educational continuity with elementary school as preschool is considered the first stage of basic education; improving the quality of preschool education; offering innovative dynamics to pedagogical action.

Those curriculum guidelines are based in the large questions that society poses today to preschool education: citizenship and democratic participation, multiculturality; ecology; nonsexist approaches to education; the access to new technologies and the motivation to use the instruments of reading and writing; the aesthetical and cultural appreciation. A first version of the Curriculum Guidelines was presented to educators , teacher educators, local educational authorities and inspectors during June-July 1996. It will be experimented in around four hundred kindergartens during 1996-97 side by side with in-service training. A final version will be published in June 1997.

The creation of the Office for the Expansion and Development of Preschool Education

Aims

In order to coordinate all the initiatives for the development of preschool education an inter-ministerial **Office for the Expansion and**

Development of Preschool Education was created involving staff from the Ministry of Education and from the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security. This Office aims at:

- conceptualizing the plans of action of the "Program for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education", namely to produce legislation; to develop proposals for pedagogical intervention, such as curriculum guidelines, pedagogical organization and training teachers;
- to promote and to follow the measures for program development
-to create incentives to innovative programs, training and research programs in connection with other services and entities, for the improvement of the whole network of kindergartens.

This Office will work in close connection with a consulting board with representatives of the different social partners and educational researchers.

A "Large Table" approach

We want to be able to join efforts and creativity around a project which transcends ourselves. We aim at developing this program as a negotiated project involving all partners in a true "conversation" (Bruner, 1986). This is why I speak of a "Large Table" approach. Actually I have a Large Table in my office which is my preferred work place, not the desk. Around there I want to be able to negotiate diversity under a common goal, to be able to have a flexible structure where all partners feel safe to present their opinions and offer their contributions. I would like my role as coordinator of the work of this Office around the Large Table to be

"central but invisible" (Donaldson, 1979), in a sense that I constantly can move from the center so as to give space for dynamism and avoiding centralism to happen. This is the major art of teaching. The challenge is to make this "invisible centrality" to become the supreme art of my present administrative tasks.

Investing in the Early Childhood Professional

Pedagogical autonomy, career and incentives

No high quality plan for the expansion of preschool education will be possible without a clear investment in the early childhood professional. She (he) must be, above all, dignified in her work. The early childhood professional has pedagogical autonomy in her/his activity and has the responsibility for the organization of educational activities. She/he has the right to a career, which means stages, formation, an ethical commitment. She has the right to decent salaries. We made the commitment that, within three years, we may have the teachers of private, non-profit organizations (the ones with lowest wages) to have similar pay to the ones who work for private profit schools. We have been influencing the political powers so as to recognize the urgent need for training at university level for the early childhood educators. We need to provide consistent in-service training for all preschool teachers from public and private institutions. If we want quality preschool education, the Government is responsible for providing training. We envision in-service training center-based, contextualized, stimulating research and innovation programs. Special incentives are being prepared for teachers working in deprived areas or in very isolated areas, so that the best are

encouraged to work with the children in most need. One of the problems we are facing in the field is the high levels of turn-over specifically in non-profit schools and in more isolated areas. The state needs to give incentives to teachers in order to stabilize their employment. We also need to look at a profession which is led by women. In Portugal 99.0 of the early childhood professionals are women. We need to make this profession attractive to men. We are concerned with the increasing number of single-parent families (in Europe, more than 20%), the high rates of male unemployment. We are confronted with higher rates of school failure in our boys, more girls having access to university. A serious question is: What male models are we giving our children?

Early Childhood educators and adult educators

We aim at developing in-service training programs in cooperation with Teacher Training Colleges in order to prepare professionals to become not only excellent teachers of young children but also experts in adult education. They need to interact with and assist parents, administrative authorities and staff. They need to be skilled at the transformative process of empowerment consistent with adult education. They need to inform their work with a dialogic approach (Freire, 1975).

A professional with a sense of public service

The early childhood professional cannot be just a technocrat or a bureaucrat or a functionary. She is a professional with a sense of her "vocation", in a sense of "public service" (Hansen, 1996).

Hansen describes vocation as "a form of public service that yields enduring personal fulfillment to those who provide it" (p. xiii). "Teaching as a vocation calls attention to the personal and service-oriented dimensions of the practice that draw people to it, and that enable them to find success despite adversity and difficulty" (p. xiv). According to his most recent work "the idea of teaching as a vocation does not provide a rose-colored lens through which to perceive education. Instead, it opens a window to the range of accomplishments accessible to any serious-minded teacher. It provides a hopeful perspective that can better position teachers to take advantage of the opportunities present circumstances afford them" (1996, p. 161). Present circumstances in Portugal call forth a new enthusiasm, a sense of a project, why not say so? a sense of mission to be fulfilled.

I recall here Ana, a teacher I studied for almost than three years, an outstanding professional (Vasconcelos, 1995). I said then that "her moral self" was at the heart of her teaching, a moral self made out of her inner convictions, her conception of the child, her life experiences and "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989). Her moral self was produced by an "examined life", aware that "our actions affect other people" (Tom, 1984). I know hundred of Anas throughout Portugal. They are the scaffold, the frame, the roots for the new policies of Portuguese preschool education. I apologize for insisting: <u>We have to respect them and not to use them</u>.

A couple of years ago Ana was an example and an inspiration on how to work around a "Large Table" (Vasconcelos, 1995). She practiced that steady work, day after day, in her kindergarten Figueirinha, despite the very discouraging times we were living in.

For me and for her, the quality of our work together was a way of creating hope.

I quoted then a very beautiful passage from the Bible where Jeremiah[1] , the prophet, despite being in a prison, bought a field, saying that "houses and fields and vineyards shall yet again be bought in this land". What a crazy thing, to buy a field if you are in prison for life! Ana, that preschool teacher, was planting her field, day after day, in a steady leap of faith, in a "vocation" made out of personal fulfillment.

I may say that we have come to a time where "houses and fields and vineyards can again be bought in this land". So we need to plant the field of our Portuguese early childhood education. For me, it has been an exciting time, despite all difficulties. I found my "Large Table" and I am trying "to plant it".

As a conclusion I dare to try to translate a piece of a Portuguese poem by Sophia de Mello Breyner and I will say, almost as a prayer, first in Portuguese and then in English:

Eis o mar e a luz vistos por dentro.(...)
Esta manhã é igual ao princípio do mundo e aqui eu venho ver o que jamais se viu.
O meu olhar tornou-se liso como um vidro. Sirvo para que as coisas se vejam.(...)
A linha das águas é lisa e limpa como um vidro.
O azul recorta os promontórios aureolados de glória matinal.
Tudo está vestido de solenidade e nudez.
Ali eu quereria chorar de gratidão com a cara encostada contra as pedras. (p. 108)

This is the sea and the light seen from within. (...)

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[1] Book of Jeremiah 32: 1 and following

This morning is like the beginning of the world and I come here
to see what has never been seen before.
My gaze became smooth like a glass. I can be used so that things
may be seen. (...)
The line of the waters is smooth and clean like a glass.
The blue outlines the rocks adorned with the glory of morning .
Everything is clothed in solemnity and nakedness.
There I would like to cry in gratitude, my face against the rocks.
(p. 108)

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